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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR RICE MEETS WITH SAUDI ARABIAN PERM REP
AL NAFISEE

Classified By: Ambassador Rice, For Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During their introductory meeting on March 3, Ambassador Rice and Saudi PermRep Khalid Al-Nafisee discussed Saudi Arabia's progress on the Interfaith Dialogue, the Lebanon Tribunal and Gaza, recognition of Kosovo, and relations with Iraq and Iran. Al-Nafisee was keen to emphasize Saudi King Abdullah's commitment to the Interfaith Dialogue, and he asked for USG support for the initiative, which appears to be Saudi Arabia's priority at the UN.

Interfaith Dialogue

¶2. (C) Al-Nafisee said King Abdullah's focus on his Interfaith Dialogue, which was the subject of a General Assembly session in November 2008, was the impetus for Al-Nafisee's appointment as Permanent Representative and ended a two-year gap where Saudi Arabia had no PermRep in New York. Al-Nafisee said he received a "direct order" from the King to promote the Interfaith Dialogue. He plans frequently to invite other Ambassadors to take part in small meetings of roughly 15 PermReps plus a religious leader (or a person of no faith) to begin building relationships within the diplomatic corps. King Abdullah's goals for the Interfaith Dialogue are similar to the ideas of the Alliance of Civilizations, and he said Saudi Arabia would take part in the upcoming conference in Turkey of the Alliance of Civilizations. While the UN Secretary General is supportive of the Interfaith Dialogue as are many other UN member states, he said some countries such as France and Spain and some Muslim nations (although he did not highlight which ones) are opposed to the project because they do not want the UN involved in religious issues.

Gaza and the Lebanon Tribunal

¶3. (C) Ambassador Rice thanked Al-Nafisee for Saudi Arabia's leadership at the donors' conference convened in Sharm El Sheikh on May 2. She said supporting the Palestinian Authority is crucial, and the USG wants to make certain that the resources pledged are not diverted to Hamas. Al-Nafisee said he was pleased his government was channeling resources to the Palestinian people, and he agreed that donors need to be vigilant. Ambassador Rice also thanked Al-Nafisee for the Kingdom's support to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Al-Nafisee said that despite political progress the recent death of a follower of Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt was evidence that political instability was continuing. (Comment: This likely refers to the mid-February stabbing death of Lufti Zeineddin, a high-profile follower of Jumblatt. Jumblatt blames Hizballah for the attack. End comment.)

Kosovo

¶4. (C) Ambassador Rice asked Al-Nafisee if he had met with Kosovo's President during his recent trip to New York, noting

that the President is keen to receive diplomatic recognition from Saudi Arabia. Al-Nafisee said he had met with the President, and he acknowledged Kosovo's desire for Saudi Arabia's recognition, which Kosovo's President judges would influence other Muslim countries to grant diplomatic recognition as well. He said the Kingdom was a strong supporter of Kosovo during the Balkan conflict, and without committing, said diplomatic recognition was probable in the near future.

Iran and Iraq

15. (C) Ambassador Rice noted Saudi Arabia's reluctance to send an Ambassador to Baghdad. Al-Nafisee said King Abdullah feels that Iraqi President Maliki has "let him down" by turning toward Iran. Al-Nafisee said Saudi Arabia is demanding that Iraq be tougher on Iranian forces and influence. Ambassador Rice replied that Saudi Arabia should give Maliki some credit for making the tough decision to go against the Mahdi Army and other Iranian-backed groups.

16. (C) Al-Nafisee said he is "very worried" about Iran because it is both strong and unpredictable. He said from time to time Iranian officials claim sovereignty over Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, which is home to the majority of Saudi Arabia's Shia population. Regarding deterrence on Iran's nuclear program, Al-Nafisee said he was more worried about Israel than the U.S., since Israel no longer had a rational, strategic vision as it did, for instance, during the 1967 War. Now, he said, Israel strikes out over the smallest provocation with long-term implications for the region. Ambassador Rice said the review of U.S.

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policy toward Iran would take account of the views of regional allies such as Saudi Arabia.

Bio Note

17. (C) During their first meeting, Al-Nafisee was personable and in fluent English showed a good sense of humor in describing his newness to the diplomatic corps and his experience as an engineer with Saudi Aramco--the state-owned oil and gas company. He joked, "As a trained engineer I look for results. Here (at the UN) there ain't no results." Al-Nafisee said U.S.-Saudi relations have a long history, and he acknowledged that September 11 was meant as a test for the relationship, but bin Laden's goal of creating a rift between the countries "did not work."
Rice